

Sermon for Christmas Day, December 25, 2015  
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY  
The Very Rev. Canon Dr. Raewynne J. Whiteley

One of the wonderful things that has happened here at St James the last year or so is the profusion of babies.

Last night

little Genevieve played the part of baby Jesus;

born on December 30,

this is her first Christmas.

The supporting cast included Jack, last year's baby Jesus,

this year appearing as a lamb,

and Audrey showing her experience in her second year as a sheep.

Madison is away visiting her family,

but here today

we have Baby James,

and Parker, the youngest of the band.

Looking at them now,

it's hard to imagine that Genevieve, Jack, Audrey, Madison and James

were once as small as Parker,

and even he

has grown and changed

in the few weeks since he was born.

Even so,

he is still entirely dependent on the adults in his life

to provide everything he needs, to feed him and change him

and love him.

And it's hard to believe

that that's the Jesus the shepherds found

lying in the manger

that very first Christmas.

We know the whole story, how he grew up to teach and heal and bring blessings to the people he met along the way; we know that he died on the cross for our sake, and, almost incomprehensibly, rose to new life the first Easter morning.

We know that.

But the shepherds knew none of it. All they saw

was a tiny baby, still kind of wrinkly and unformed, lying in a feed trough,

because his parents had been traveling, and the best place  
they'd found to stay  
was a stable.  
Warm, dry,  
but hardly the place  
you'd expect to find a king.

Because that  
was what the shepherds came looking for. The Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.  
That's what the angels had told them to expect,  
but what this Christ would look like  
was hardly imaginable. They were told to look for a baby  
wrapped in bands of cloth  
and lying in a manger,  
a child surely marked by poverty  
if his parents could find him no better cradle  
than a food trough,  
and even though a new life  
is always full of promise and potential,  
the likelihood of  
this child ever amounting to anything was remote . . .  
But in the same breath  
the angel had said  
that this child,  
this helpless little baby  
would be the Savior. But the only Savior they knew  
was the Emperor Octavian,  
more commonly known by one of his titles, Augustus.  
He was a good emperor, as emperors went;  
his reign was humane and stable, and the people,  
free of the fear of imminent war,  
had the chance to dream of a new, wonderful age of peace.  
Ancient monuments  
ascribed to him the name Savior.  
If Octavian  
was savior,  
who is this child?

And the angel said  
that the child

would be the Messiah. But the only Messiah they knew  
was the Messiah promised long ago by the prophets.  
Isaiah had predicted him, but at least in chapter 9 of his prophecy,  
the Messiah he predicted  
would come with armies, defeating the enemy with brutality  
and violence,  
stamping them under his feet.  
If that was the Savior  
who is this child?

And the angel said  
that the child  
would be Lord.  
And as he breathed the word, in Greek, Kurios,  
in Hebrew  
unpronounceable,  
the very name  
of God.

God? What was this angel saying? That God  
might come to earth, that God  
might be discovered sleeping  
in a stable, that God  
could be found to dwell  
in the fragile  
helpless body  
of a baby?

Blasphemy! How could the God,  
that no one dared name,  
be met  
in this child?

It was impossible . . . but perhaps no more impossible  
to people whose whole life revolved around camping out in the country  
keeping track of straying sheep,  
no more impossible  
that the idea that they would get a special message from God,  
no more impossible  
than seeing an angel plus a heavenly host

all praising God, no more impossible  
than finding themselves  
stirring, getting ready for a journey  
to where they didn't know  
all on the chance of seeing  
that wonderful  
but fairly ordinary sight,  
a new born baby.

Impossible,  
but what if it were true?

And so the shepherds  
left their sheep, the first of countless others  
to leave everything behind them, sheep and fishing boats and home and father and  
mother,  
leaving everything behind  
to follow  
the Babe  
of Bethlehem.

And when they got there, they found it just as the angel had said,  
Mary  
and Joseph,  
and with them the child, lying in the manger.  
Just an ordinary baby, it seems,  
nothing special,  
as helpless as any other,  
but unique,  
because in this tiny body  
all the fullness of God  
was pleased to dwell.  
And that baby was destined  
to become the king who rode triumphant into Jerusalem with palms  
strewing his way.  
That baby was destined  
to be the criminal  
who hung lifeless from the cross,  
even though he was innocent, innocent from the very moment of his birth and even  
before,

but who died for our sake.  
And that baby was destined  
to stand in the garden  
that first Easter morning,  
with wounded hands and feet and side,  
declaring with his resurrection  
that death is overcome  
for all time  
and inviting us  
into life  
eternal.  
That tiny body . . .  
The fullness of God.

And as impossible as it seemed to those shepherds  
they knew  
as they stood before this child, that this was truly  
the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord,  
and they could do no other  
than worship.

There's a lovely carol that captures the scene:  
"A stable-lamp is lighted  
Whose glow shall wake the sky;  
The stars shall bend their voices,  
And every stone shall cry.  
And every stone shall cry,  
And straw like gold shall shine;  
A barn shall harbor heaven,  
A stall become a shrine."

A shrine  
not because of its historical significance, not because of its great glory,  
but because there, for a short while  
the fullness of God dwelt  
in the tiny body  
of a baby.

And we are invited to join them there,  
shepherds, angels, Mary and Joseph,

and every one of us,  
invited to stand or perhaps even kneel before that tiny baby  
and worship him.

Worship him

not for the things he has done, because Christmas is only the beginning,  
and there will be time for that later, but worship him now

as Savior, Messiah, Lord,

as he comes to us

as the babe of Bethlehem,

and later too, in the sacrament of his presence, the bread of heaven and cup of salvation,  
the body and blood of Christ,

God come among us,

God with us,

Emmanuel.